

PRESS CONFERENCE:

The Rt. Hon. Desmond Browne MP, Secretary of State for Defense, The United Kingdom

Lt. Gen. W.R. Rollo CBE Late RHG/D, Deputy Commanding General, Multi-National Force – Iraq

Mr. John Talmott, Chargé D'affaires, British Embassy, Baghdad

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PARTICIPANTS:

**Mr. Des Browne
Lt. Gen. Bill Rollo
Mr. John Talmott**

REPORTERS:

**Debra Haynes from The Times of London
Hugh Sykes from BBC News
Gina Chon from The Wall Street Journal**

Unidentified reporters from The Christian Science Monitor and Al-Erbya[ph] TV.

REPORTERS 1-6

***REP1 = REPORTER 1**

***INT = INTERPRETER**

MR TALMOTT: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My name is John Talmott. I am the British chargé d'affaires here in Baghdad. I'm delighted to welcome you all here today. I just wanted to say those few words of welcome and also to introduce those who don't know the secretary of state for defense and General Rollo, who is the senior British military representative here in Iraq. But over to Secretary of State for Defense.

MR BROWNE: Thank you very much indeed. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's good to be here again. If I may, I'll take a few brief moments to give a short overview of where I think we are and what I've been doing over the last couple of days and then we'll take your questions. The first thing I'd like to say is how impressed I am by the improvements in security in Basra. Over the last six months, the Iraqi security forces, under the leadership of Generals Mohan and Jalil, have shown a consistent and robust approach to all security challenges in Basra. Since PEK[?] they have been tested...the Iraqi security forces have been tested on many occasions in the streets of Basra and have prevailed on each and every occasion. As a consequence of PEK[?], we've moved to a position where we, the UK, offer broad support to the Iraqi security forces. In particular we provide mentoring and training of them.

And yesterday I met with the British commander leading the training of 14 Division of the Iraqi Army. I saw training and progress as I have seen in the past on my visits to Iraq and I spoke to Iraqi officers. It's heartening indeed to hear their passion for their Army much as the sort of passion I see in the British Armed Forces. Of course security remains a continuing challenge but General Mohan, whom I met yesterday, and General Jalil are providing the quality of leadership that is fundamental to delivering the security that is the basis for all the progress that we want to see in Basra. Security is a necessary precondition for the change that we want to see. And it's a platform on which Iraqis will build the good governance and economic development that in turn will create sustained and lasting prosperity. And yesterday I spoke at an economic development conference at Basra Airport. This was a serious and impressive meeting in what will be one of the central hubs of economic development for a sovereign Iraq. Everywhere in the world, travel drives economies. The simple fact is that every one million passengers that pass through an airport create 1,000 jobs. And already we are seeing an increase in commercial traffic in Basra, but there is much more capacity for growth, increasing connections, the development, for example, of a hotel/conference center and the other sort of economic development that people see across the world growing around about provincial airports. Iraqis

know that trade and transport will drive growth in Basra. And increasingly foreign donors and multinational companies are recognizing those opportunities. While I was speaking at that conference in Basra, there was another equivalent conference taking place in Kuwait between international businessmen and Iraqi Basra-based businessmen. That's happening because the world recognizes the fundamentals of Southern Iraq. Through its deep sea port at Umm Qasr, Basra accounts for over two-thirds of Iraq's international trade. Foreign investors and donors like the Japanese government recognize the huge potential, not just of the port, but of the entire province to grow further and faster. Since his appointment by the prime minister last year as the UK's representative on the Basra Development Commission, Michael Waring, whom I spent a day with in Kuwait, has done a stunning job in gripping the issues of economic development and building the partnerships that will bring increasing flow of investment into Basra. I'd just say, ladies and gentlemen, the UK's commitment to Iraq is absolute but it is changing to reflect changing circumstances. As time goes on, the focus of our effort on economic development will increase their comfort which we are all working as a secure, well-governed Iraq, providing economic security and good health and education for the people. Thank you very much. I think we'll take some questions

now.

REP1: [unintelligible] Christian Science Monitor. Sir, you spoke about the improving security in Basra. But with all due respect, I mean just a few days ago, the only neurologist in town was assassinated. On a daily basis, I mean kidnappings, assassinations, intimidations, there was a protest a few days ago calling for the resignation of those two individuals, General Jalil and Mohan. How do you square that with what you just described? Thank you.

MR BROWNE: Well, can I just say to you that, I mean I have been coming out to Iraq and visiting Basra among other places regularly for the past almost two years. I think this is my eighth visit. Just shortly before we moved to provincial Iraqi control and came out of Basra, the level of violence in Basra I understand a large majority of that was directed as was a phenomenally high level and the casualties, of course, that we suffered there in Basra people know. There is violence in Basra and I accept that. And the security situation demands improvement and I believe it will improve. But I just say to you that we have to keep this in perspective. And the judgment that we took in consultation with our American allies and with the Iraqi security forces and their government was that the security

challenges of Basra were better dealt with by the Basralis themselves—by their own security forces, by their politicians, by their leadership. And that was why we moved to provincial Iraqi control and we have seen improvements in the ability of the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi police in particular to be able to deal with that. Under the leadership of General Jalil, there has been significant improvement that has been a challenge to the corruption in the police in Basra. And there has been a dismissal of a substantial number of police officers. The general himself recently addressed these issues quite publicly, recognizing the challenges that you categorized there by the incidents that you identified, and set his priorities by them. And that's entirely his responsibility and what he should do. And I accept there are problems. I accept that there is still a lot of work to be done. But there has been, in my estimation in relation to what I have seen in [unintelligible] Basra, an improvement in the situation but there is still a long way to go.

REP2:

Debra Haynes with The Times. Has any decision been made yet on the plan to withdraw the troop level to 2,500 by the spring. And also, will the request by General Mohan for an extra two brigades of troops in Basra mean that British troops should stay longer to help with the training? Thank you.

MR BROWNE: Can I just say to you that in the time I have been the secretary of state for defense, we have been making decisions in relation to troop levels right across the south of Iraq—not just in Basra but in other provinces and then latterly in Basra Province and in Basra City itself—on the basis of conditions on the ground and of the military advice that we receive and to the job that we need to do there. Just before Christmas in about October, we set ourselves a plan to reduce our forces to about 2,500 pound subject...2,500, sorry, people subject to the conditions, the prevailing conditions and the military advice. And as you know, we're going through a process of assessing those conditions and I will take the military advice when it comes to me in relation to the numbers of troops that we need there based on what we need to do. You are aware that that process is going on from the question that you asked. It is not yet complete. I have not yet received that advice. And when I receive that advice I will do what I traditionally do which is I will announce it to Parliament because they are the people who should be told when it comes to these staging posts and the decision making. And I have accepted responsibility for it. As far as the 14th Division of the Iraqi Army is concerned, we have been building that up. The numbers of Iraqi troops who have been going into the south of Iraq has increased quite significantly as, indeed, the Iraqi Army itself

has. We have accepted the responsibility to mentor and train those troops. We've been carrying that out. Yesterday I visited in mentoring and training process at the Shiva[ph] base. We will continue to do that. That was our responsibility and that was part of our contribution to the future security of the Iraqi people. Thank you.

REP3: Thank you very much. Secretary of State, Hugh Sykes from BBC News. Five years ago a Basra café owner said to me, “The British aren’t tough enough and the city is being taken over by criminals.” This week, somebody else in Basra told one of my colleagues on The Times very much the same thing—that the city was being taken over by militia. Do you really think the people of Basra, those who appreciated the British presence in the first place as a stabilizing, peace-making force in the city, do you really think that the people of Basra are better off without you and with you out there at the airbase than they were before with you in the town?

MR BROWNE: I think the judgment that we made, and we have made a series of judgments across Southern Iraq in terms of provincial Iraqi control, the judgment that we made which we made in consultation with our American partners, with the Iraqi government, and with the Iraqi

security forces was the correct one. I don't deny that there are continuing problems in Basra. I ask that people who rightly, I think, observe the nature and condition of those problems ought to keep their sense of perspective about them in relation to the challenges that this country has faced right across and the proportion of violence that there is in the southern part of the country as opposed to other parts of the country. But the judgment that we made was that these continuing problems were better addressed by the Iraqi security forces under their own leadership. I do not demur from that judgment. The evidence of my own eyes over the last couple of days and of my constant monitoring of what is going on, albeit that there is violence in the city, suggests to me that that will be the resolution. I have faith in the leadership of General Mohan. I think General Jalil in particular has done a very good job with the Iraqi police in Basra. There's still more to be done and I am convinced, in the months to come, we will see the benefits of that decision and significant progress and improving security in Basra. But at the end of the day, I mean I understand that we have to deliver that for the people of Basra and I don't underestimate the challenge.

REP4: Asks question in Arabic.

INT: Question from Al-Erbya TV. As far as...the question is regard the

kidnapped British people. Is it true that...or there are some reports saying that those kidnaps are actually now outside Iraq and one of the kidnaps is seriously wounded or probably died. Do you have any information regarding this?

MR BROWNE: I think for very obvious reasons in these circumstances, I'm reluctant to discuss the detail of this incident and of our ongoing work with the Iraqi government and with their security forces in any detail. May I just say that the issue relating to the safety of those of our citizens who have been kidnapped has been at the forefront of my discussions with the members of the Iraqi government, with the defense minister, and with the security forces. We are doing everything that we can to ensure the safety of our citizens and we are working very closely with the Iraqi government and others in seeking to achieve that aim.

REP5: Thank you. Gina Chon. The Wall Street Journal. In terms of your mention of your focus on economic development, what do you think the prospects really are in Basra given the level of corruption there and the criminal gangs and militia groups that control the port, oil-smuggling operations, and other illegal activities and the

possibility of some of the resources going to these kinds of groups?

MR BROWNE: Well, I mean, I think the honest answer to that question is the potential in economic terms, in development in terms of Southern Iraq is almost limitless. The oil resources of Southern Iraq and the development of the oil infrastructure, in my view, is an economic imperative. The development of the Port of Umm Qasr developed in a way that allows it to operate to the highest international standards which includes dealing with the issues of corruption and dealing with the involvement of militias is crucially important also. But the Basra International Airport, which we visited yesterday and I'm sure some of you have seen, is as good in terms of the provision...the internal provision of that building as any provincial airport I have ever been in. It is...it has significant potential for the generation of economic opportunity for the people of Basra and for the wider region. So all of these things, in my view, are possible to do. They will, of course, have to be done by a process of improving security and protecting them against just the sort of corrupt behavior that you identify. Yesterday there was a very high-level representation of the Iraqi government in Basra and Umm Qasr looking at just how that can be done, how it can be secured and the investment can be protected against that sort of corrupt exploitation.

I mean I believe it is possible to do that. You know I know from my own experience of economic development in other parts of the world in semi-secure environments, economics can drive and improve security. And I think that's possible to get both of these things working in tandem together in Southern Iraq. And I'm delighted and grateful for the help and assistance that we have received, in particular from Michael Waring who is one of the world's leading businessmen, at helping to drive that forward. One more question I think. Yes.

REP6:

I guess kind of two points. One, with what Gina was talking about; these additional troops that have been requested by General Mohan and based on, I guess, the visit yesterday by the Iraqi delegation, is there...there is a plan to sort of retake the port from militia elements? That was the first thing I wanted to know about. And two, something we hear...that I hear often even today, for instance, from different Western-type officials is that really they'll say that the problem with Basra right now is that the Iraqi government and the coalition to an extent don't really know what's going on. That the British really don't have an idea of what's going on in the city because they are only at the airport and meet with security officials not in the city, you know, once a month, maybe a little bit more. But I don't know if that part is true but just, really, how do you

respond to that that you are, in truth, you really don't know what's going on in Basra? So those are the two things I was curious about.

MR BROWNE: Well, I mean, let me just say to you that the additional troops will be, I think and I'm quite confident of this, deployed into Southern Iraq are all part of the process of building up the Iraqi security forces there and, in particular, the Army. You will recollect, of course, that in the recent past, 10 Division of the Iraqi Army were based there and they have now been deployed out of Basra and 14 Division has been built up in order to take control of the security...the basic security of the city supporting the police as the police performance improves. So that process was always planned for and has been ongoing. It is not particularly related to any one objective such as that that you described in relation to the port. The decisions for the development of the port are subject to review at the moment. Part of the purpose of the visit yesterday by a high-level group including ministers from the central government of Iraq, was to assess the skill and nature of the challenge and to develop a plan for the regeneration of this very significant asset. As far as knowledge of what is going on in Basra is concerned, of course we have many ways of establishing what is going on in Basra, many interlocutors and regular contact. And our people are in regular daily contact with a number of different people who are able to

move about the city and know what is going on in the city. And of course we make our assessments about what we do in relation to Basra based on that level of knowledge. Thank you very much.

MR TALMOTT: Thank you very much indeed.